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ABSTRACT

While most people would readily agree that all family members and especially children are likely to experience adverse effects to their personal development as a result of being homeless, it is both surprising and distressing to note how little attention this topic has received in the professional literature to date. Counselors are well-advised to first discuss the problems of homelessness as they impact both individual students and the school body at-large with principals and teachers. Counselors might also express their availability to consult with interested teachers about various types of guidance activities that could be used to promote cooperation and cohesiveness among all the members in a classroom setting. This recommendation is based on the awareness that many homeless children tend to withdraw from peer interactions. By collaborating with key local persons concerning the needs of homeless children, counselors can develop an informal support network and referral system. Providing various types of support that encourage homeless parents to become more involved in their children's lives is a useful way to help reduce their sense of disengagement and parental impotence. Developing special groups for homeless children may have a potential negative effect of further stigmatizing homeless students. (LLL)

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Building Strategies to Meet the Developmental Needs of Homeless Children

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Abstract

This article discusses numerous intervention strategies guidance counselors might consider in designing a comprehensive school-based program for homeless children.

Building Strategies to Meet the Developmental Needs of Homeless Children

There has recently been a heightening of national attention regarding the problem of homelessness in America. This concern has, in part, been due to the changing profile of homeless persons in the United States over the past decade. As numerous researchers have noted (Children's Defense Fund, 1988; Moynihan, 1988), the fastest growing group of homeless persons to emerge during the 1980s were families with children. Most of these families are characterized as single, female-headed households in which more than one child is present. Unfortunately, it is expected that an increasing segment of homeless persons in America will be young and female during the 1990s (Moynihan, 1988; Shane, 1989).

Although the exact number of homeless persons is difficult to calculate, current estimates suggest that are at least 2.5 million people who are unable to secure housing at any time in this country (Mills & Ota, 1989). Closer scrutiny of the demography of homelessness in this country reflects that over 500,000 of these persons are children and youth. Clearly, given the large number of homeless school-age children that currently exist and projections for a continuing increase in the size of this group, public school

administrators, teachers, and counselors will experience escalating demands to deal with the unique needs of these students in the coming years.

While most people would readily agree that all family members and especially children are likely to experience adverse effects to their personal development as a result of being homeless, it is both surprising and distressing to note how little attention this topic has received in the professional literature to date. In order to help school counselors and educators better understand the various ways in which homelessness impacts children's personal growth, Daniels (1991) recently analyzed the psychological ramifications of this phenomenon from a developmental perspective.

Using her model as a guide, the authors present an overview of numerous types of intervention strategies school counselors might consider using when working with homeless children. Thus, the purpose of this article is twofold. First, it is designed to encourage counselors to take a lead in helping homeless students meet their developmental needs. Second, it underscores the importance of taking a comprehensive approach when working with this often neglected group of students.

Clearly, the implementation of a multi-service approach necessitates the support and involvement of school administrators, teachers, professionals in the community, parents, and homeless students themselves. By presenting

this intervention roadmap, the authors hope that counselors find it helpful in considering various strategies they might use in tailoring an approach that best meets the needs of homeless children in their particular school setting.

Soliciting Support from School Principals

Given the large number of homeless families that currently exist in the United States and the increasing number of children who are likely to join these ranks in the next decade, it is predictable that most public school administrators and teachers will encounter homeless students at some time in their career. Recognizing this situation, counselors are well-advised to first discuss the problems of homelessness as they impact both individual students and the school-body at-large with their principals. This is an important starting point in terms of planning to initiate services with teachers, community persons, parents, and students, in that the principal's understanding of the problems and support for future interventions will largely determine the directions counselors are able to proceed.

Working with Teachers: Accessing Support from Professionals at the Front Line

In fact, teachers often represent the first line of intervention with homeless children and youth. Daily classroom contact with students provide educators a unique opportunity to become knowledgeable about major changes that

may occur in a child's life. Thus, out of respect for the important role professional educators play in students' lives, school counselors would do well to initiate an intervention designed to address the needs of homeless children by first working with groups of interested teachers.

However, given the level of responsibilities most teachers are already expected to fulfill, counselors are encouraged to be particularly well-organized in assisting them to become more aware and knowledgeable about the ways in which homelessness impacts children's development. One of the best ways to accomplish this goal is to have the school guidance counselors invite all teachers to an information sharing meeting early in the school year. Since this sort of discussion group is designed to be voluntarily, counselors may find it useful to meet informally with individual teachers ahead of time to solicit their support and stimulate interest in the group meeting.

The discussion group should last no longer than 60 minutes in which three primary objectives would be addressed. First, a brief overview of the local homeless problem should be presented including a report on the approximate number of homeless children currently in attendance at the school.

Second, counselors would do well to summarize the various ways in which homelessness is likely to impact a child's personal development. Particular attention should

be directed towards enhancing teachers' awareness of the specific school-related problems which may arise as a result of having homeless children in their classes. By using Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs and Erikson's (1963) theory of psychosocial development as a guide, Daniels (1991) provides counselors with a practical framework which may be useful in helping educators gain a better understanding of the unique developmental problems these students often experience during this sort of in-service encounter.

Third, teachers should leave this sort of group meeting feeling that the guidance counselor represents an informed resource within the school who will be helpful in working with homeless students in the future. This might be accomplished by describing the different types of consultation and collaboration, referral, and counseling services the guidance department is able to provide teachers and homeless students.

Providing Consultation Services

Although one discussion group will obviously not address all the concerns teachers are likely to have regarding this special population of children, it does provide a means of educating them about ways in which guidance counselors can offer them support with homeless students' during the school year. In this regard it may be very helpful for counselors to emphasize their willingness

to consult with teachers concerning different things they might do in the classroom to motivate homeless students to do well in school.

In addition, counselors might also express their availability to consult with interested teachers about various types of guidance activities that could be used to promote cooperation and cohesiveness among the all the members in a classroom setting. This recommendation is based on the awareness that many homeless children tend to withdraw from peer interactions as a result of feeling alienated and stigmatized by their families' personal misfortune. Thus, counselors would do well to offer assistance in collaborating with teachers about ways of incorporating specific guidance activities that are designed to create a "community of care within the school" (D'Andrea & Daniels, 1991) by promoting greater classroom cohesiveness and cooperation.

Such consultation efforts represent other ways in which counselors can help homeless children gain a sense of self-esteem and personal worth as a result of experiencing positive peer interactions in the context of the classroom. Also, by expressing their interest to continue to collaborate with teachers regarding the numerous problems homeless students face is a concrete way for guidance counselors to amplify and sustain the impact of having an initial group meeting with teachers concerning this special population of children.

Networking Within the Community

Numerous experts have noted that homeless families frequently lack the resources to tend to children's basic needs (Bassuk & Rubin, 1987; Bassuk, Lauriat, & Rubin, 1987; Morioka, 1991a). This often results in children being alienated from their peers as a result of inadequate clothing and poor personal hygiene (Daniels, 1991). Clearly, this sort of alienation from one's peers in childhood is likely to have a negative impact on both the child's academic motivation and personal development (Craig, 1989).

While schools are usually not equipped to help students with these basic needs, it is suggested that counselors are well-positioned to develop strategies to help address these needs. This recommendation may, however, require some school counselors to become more aggressive in terms of initiating outreach services with representatives from local churches and other community organizations.

By collaborating with key local persons concerning the needs of homeless children, counselors can develop an informal support network from which they can secure support for clothing, foodstuff, and other supplies that homeless families and their children need to live a more dignified life. D'Andrea (1991) discusses the effectiveness of using various group formats (e.g. brown-bag luncheons with community representatives, Saturday morning breakfast with

local church leaders) in developing a similar type of support network for a program designed to serve inner-city black youth and their families.

Building a Referral System For Homeless Students

Given the multiple stresses homeless children face, it is predictable that many of these students will present problems whose level of severity is simply beyond the capacity of school personnel to deal with in an effective manner. Consequently, the proactive-minded guidance counselor will take time to become familiar with the various resources that are available in the community in order to be prepared to make an emergency referral when such a crisis occurs.

Rather than working alone in this regard, it may be useful for guidance counselors from several schools within the same geographical area to work together to sponsor a meeting in which various professionals from the community might come together to confer about the problems school personnel face working with homeless children. The type of persons invited might include professionals from local mental health centers, adolescent drug and alcohol counselors, social workers, medical professionals, representatives from local homeless shelters, counselors from planned parenthood, law enforcement officials, and youth employment counselors to name a few.

Convening such a group meeting could serve four

specific purposes. These purposes should be clearly outlined both when the individuals are invited to attend and again at the beginning of the meeting. In doing so, all the participants will have a clear understanding of the nature and purpose of the group. The specific purposes for convening these persons together are briefly described below.

First, this sort of group meeting would allow guidance counselors an opportunity to discuss their observations of the various ways homelessness effects their students' development.

Second, it would provide them a chance to share with other professionals the types of interventions and services that are currently available in the schools for homeless children.

Third, the counselors could outline the existing gaps that are perceived to exist between the types of services offered in the schools and other problems homeless students' experience.

Fourth, the invited participants would be encouraged to discuss ways in which they might be able to work with the schools when specific problems emerged that the guidance counselors, teachers, and school administrators were unable to effectively address.

By working with other professionals in the community in this way, counselors are able to create an effective referral system to supplement their own efforts to promote

the development of homeless children in the school setting. Furthermore, in demonstrating this sort of group leadership, guidance counselors will be recognized as proactive youth advocates who are genuinely committed to working with other concerned persons in addressing a serious and complex problem that not only impacts students but impedes the development of the entire community as well.

For those counselors who do not feel that developing such a network system is within their capacity, the authors suggest that it may be worthwhile for them to plug into existing homeless networks where they already exist. This may involve attending meetings scheduled by other organizations as a way of learning and expressing concern about the problems homeless children face. It may also serve as a means of identifying those homeless children who are already in attendance in their school as well as encouraging representatives from other agencies to contact them when it appears that a homeless family may need to register a child at their school.

Working with Homeless Parents

In addition to the numerous problems and stresses homeless parents already experience, they must also deal with educational bureaucracies in order to register their children for school. Given the transient life-style that most homeless families experience, it is not be uncommon for many of these parents to have to go through this

registration process several times during the year.

It may be worth noting that this registration process may be particularly problematic for homeless parents as they often have difficulty securing their children's previous medical and school records. To further exacerbate an already frustrating situation, obvious questions and concerns regarding students' residency requirements may be raised by school officials. For many already emotionally-taxed homeless parents, these type of bureaucratic issues may be interpreted as representing non-supportive and antagonistic attitudes on the part of the school personnel.

In light of these potential problems, it is not uncommon for many homeless parents to express feeling that school officials do not try to work cooperatively with them and their children. In fact, the authors have noted several instances in which the regulations of various school bureaucracies took precedence over the educational needs and interests of homeless children and their parents.

Realizing the tremendous sense of personal embarrassment most homeless parents experience concerning their personal lives, it behooves school counselors to be extraordinarily sensitive to their expressed needs and requests. Counselors would do well to let homeless parents know that part of their professional role includes working as advocates for them in terms of helping to secure the most optimal conditions possible regarding their child's education and development.

Eddowes and Hranitz (1989) have studied the ways in which the daily stresses of homelessness lead many parents to become less sensitive and responsive to their children's academic and personal needs. This sort of parental disengagement, while often understandable given the constant and pervasive problems homeless parents regularly experience, has many negative ramifications on their children's development.

Many homeless parents experience heightened feelings of personal inadequacy and embarrassment regarding their living situation. Furthermore, since they are forced to move from one temporary housing shelter to another, they frequently do not have the opportunities to develop lasting and supportive relationships with other adults.

As a result of having to cope with the routine and all-encompassing stresses associated with being homeless without an adequate support system, it is little wonder that many of these parents are less likely to be involved in helping their children with homework assignments, meeting with teachers, and attending school sponsored activities. Not only are these factors thought to be directly related to a homeless parent's sense of disengagement from their children's development but they are also viewed as important variables contributing to the fact that approximately 43% of the homeless youth in America do not attend school on a regular basis (Eddowes & Hranitz, 1989).

Providing various types of support that encourage

homeless parents to become more involved in their children's lives is a useful way to help reduce their sense of disengagement and parental impotence. The school guidance department might take a lead in this effort by working with teachers, administrators, and personnel at public homeless shelters to explore ways in which they could provide various types of supportive services to homeless parents. Such action represents concrete efforts to help bridge the gap between schools and homeless children and their parents. Some of the specific strategies that might be considered in this regard include;

a. having counselors and/or teachers make visits to homeless shelters to discuss students' school progress with their parents,

b. setting up a transportation network in order that homeless parents might be able to more easily attend school functions and parent-teachers conferences, and

c. developing mechanisms in which homeless parents might be able to work as school volunteers providing tutorial services, assisting teachers in the classroom, or offering assistance with various clerical duties as administrative aides.

Clearly, such efforts will challenge guidance counselors to work with many different groups of people in the school and community in attempting to create organizational changes that reflect greater sensitivity and

responsiveness to the needs of homeless families and their children. However, given their training as human development specialists and unique position within the school system, the authors suggest that guidance counselors are the most likely professionals to initiate and coordinate such efforts.

Group Counseling For Homeless Children

Thus far, this article has described numerous suggestions for indirectly meeting the personal and academic needs of homeless children by working with groups of teachers, church leaders, community persons, and parents. In this section, the authors discuss the importance of working directly with these children.

Beyond providing individual counseling services for homeless students who experience various academic and/or personal problems in their overall development, there are two fundamental questions one might raise regarding the use of group counseling with these students. First, should group counseling services be offered to homeless students while they are at school. Second, if it is agreed that this service should be offered in the schools, how might a group for homeless children be structured and what goals should counselors attempt to achieve in providing this type of intervention.

Should Counselors Provide Group Counseling Services to Homeless Children

While it is readily agreed that group counseling represents an important component in a comprehensive effort to address the needs of homeless children, the authors caution counselors about the potential negative effect of further stigmatizing homeless students by developing special groups in which they are asked to participate. As has been noted earlier, homelessness presents children with a host of problems that distinguish them from many of their peers in a variety of ways (e.g., inadequate clothing, poor personal hygiene, lack of parental support). Each of these factors represent potentially embarrassing dilemmas for homeless children. The collective impact of these problems, however, may be personally devastating for many of these students.

With this in mind, school counselors are urged to be particularly sensitive to the ways in which they put energy into developing groups for homeless students. In schools where there are very few homeless children, it may be more worthwhile for guidance counselors to direct their energies in other avenues of intervention designed to help homeless students and their families.

This may include offering individual counseling services to the few homeless students who may be experiencing adjustment problems that are negatively impacting their personal development. Also, rather than trying to provide group counseling services in schools where

very few homeless students are in attendance, it may be more worthwhile to offer the type of outreach services mentioned earlier in an effort to support teachers and parents who have daily contact with these youngsters.

However, in those schools where there are numerous homeless students, counselors are well advised to develop groups designed to meet their developmental needs. What follows is a brief discussion of a group that was specifically implemented to foster the self-esteem of homeless, elementary school-age children in Hawaii.

Using Structured Group Counseling Sessions to Promote Homeless Children's Self-Esteem

Since children's self-esteem is noted to be vital to their general well-being (Matthews & Odom, 1989; Phillips, 1984; Stafford & Hill, 1989) and academic success (Campbell, 1991; Omizo & Omizo, 1989;), the authors created a group counseling intervention for homeless students who were attending a public elementary school in Hawaii. This intervention was comprised of six group meetings in which the school counselors attempted to promote participants' self-esteem by addressing various psychological issues thought to be particularly relevant to homeless children. Seven homeless students attending a public elementary school in Hawaii participated in these regularly scheduled group counseling sessions.

The group met weekly with each session lasting about 30

minutes. Various activities designed to promote children's self-esteem as well as encouraging the young participants to express their thoughts and feelings about being part of a homeless family were introduced by the group counselor during these meetings. Some of the specific types of activities and strategies implemented included;

a. a name tag exercise that was used in the initial group meeting as an ice-breaker,
b. having the youngsters draw and discuss a family portrait,
c. working with these children to have them identify positive feelings about themselves and their families, and
d. leading discussions about stress and ways that the group members could go about dealing with different types of stress in their daily lives.

In assessing the effectiveness of this type of group counseling format among homeless elementary school children, Morioka (1991b) reported an increase in the group's posttest mean scores in comparison to the subjects' pretest scores using the Culture-Free Self-Esteem Inventory for Children (SEI) Form A (Battle, 1982). In spite of the acknowledged threats to external validity that are inherent in the design of this exploratory study and obviously limit the generalization of the findings, the initial results suggest that group interventions may be useful in terms of promoting various dimensions of children's psychological development

such as their self-esteem and self-concept.

Conclusion

The authors have provided a set of strategies thought to be useful in working with homeless children and their families. These strategies are presented to underscore some of the ways in which school counselors might go about assisting this often neglected group of students to realize their personal and academic potential. In many ways, this intervention model challenges guidance counselors to play an active role in the lives of these children and their families by implementing a variety of direct and indirect services that necessitate outreach with teachers, parents, church leaders, community persons, and the children themselves.

Clearly, homelessness produces numerous barriers to a child's development. Recognizing these barriers and the fact that the number of homeless families and children is expected to increase in the United States during this decade may require many counselors to reassess their professional and moral responsibilities to these students. Hopefully, the set of strategies presented in this article may be found useful in helping those guidance counselors, who are concerned about the plight of homeless children, develop a comprehensive program that will complement the developmental needs of this group of youngsters.

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